

Undercover cops boosted across 9 more forces

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Project Vigilant is expanding to 9 more forces, boosting undercover patrols to disrupt predatory behaviour and prevent violence against women and girls.

Women and girls will be safer on nights out as an undercover police operation to catch predators is boosted across 9 police forces in England and Wales.

Project Vigilant deploys highly trained undercover officers in busy night-time hotspots to spot high-risk behaviour. They alert uniformed officers, enabling police to intervene early and disrupt offending before it escalates into violent crime.

Undercover officers are trained to identify clear warning signs of predatory behaviour, including loitering without reason, unwanted or sexualised contact, misogynistic comments, persistently following someone, filming women without their consent, or returning to areas they have previously been instructed by police to leave.

The government is now boosting Project Vigilant across 9 more forces, marking one of the largest crackdowns on predatory behaviour in public spaces.

For too long, instead of being able to enjoy an evening out on the town carefree, women have had to worry about their personal safety and security — from drink spiking to sexual abuse and assault.

Rather than wait for crimes to happen, police are acting early to identify and disrupt predatory behaviour, backed by an additional £1 million in funding from the Home Office.

This is the latest decisive step in tackling violence against women and girls, which the government has declared a national emergency, with an ambitious pledge to halve it within a decade.

The £1 million boost will fund over 200 undercover deployments across Kent, Hertfordshire, Gloucestershire, Essex, South Wales, Staffordshire, Merseyside, Cumbria, and the West Midlands.

Forces can also use the funding to trial new technology, sharpen data analysis, upgrade communications equipment, and strengthen officer training.

The 9 forces will join Thames Valley Police, Wiltshire Police and Norfolk Constabulary, which have already received Home Office funding for Project Vigilant deployments.

Thames Valley Police has pioneered the tactic since 2019 and has trialled spiking detection dogs as part of Project Vigilant, boosting frontline capability to detect drugs associated with drink spiking — such as GHB and MDMA — even when diluted in drinks.

Deployed alongside plainclothes officers, the dogs help prevent spiking by intercepting banned substances before they enter pubs, clubs, and bars, while also providing crucial evidence after incidents.

Essex Police alone will run 80 additional deployments. Officers will carry out high-visibility and plainclothes patrols, including traffic operations, to disrupt predatory behaviour involving vehicles —

from men loitering in cars to the misuse of taxis and private hire vehicles to target women on nights out.

Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, Jess Phillips, said:

Every woman and girl deserves to enjoy a night out without fear. On a Project Vigilant deployment, I saw first-hand the difference this approach makes.

Instead of asking women to change their behaviour, we are going after those who cause harm — disrupting predatory men and making clear where responsibility lies.

This is what treating violence against women and girls as a national emergency looks like.

Thames Valley Police has delivered strong results. Between July 2021 and September 2023, Vigilant officers stopped 532 men, with 35% identified as suspects in a violence against women and girls offence, including rape and exposure.

Michael Kill, CEO of the Night Time Industries Association, said:

Everyone deserves to enjoy a night out without fear, and the night-time economy is fully committed to working alongside police, local authorities, and partners to help create safer environments across our towns and cities. Initiatives like Project Vigilant are important because they shift the focus onto those responsible for harm, identifying and disrupting predatory behaviour before it escalates.

For too long, the conversation around safety has centred on what women should do to protect themselves. A perpetrator-focused approach is a vital step in changing that narrative and making it clear where responsibility lies.

By combining proactive policing with the ongoing efforts of venues and operators to promote safer spaces, we can help ensure that people feel confident enjoying the night-time economy without fear of harassment or harm.

This expansion forms part of the government's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, launched in December, which focuses on prevention, early intervention and relentless action against offenders.

That includes rolling out specialist rape and serious sexual offence teams in every police force to ensure rapists and serious sexual offenders are tracked down and brought to justice.

At the same time, the government is tackling violence before it starts, with new lessons to challenge misogyny and promote healthy relationships in schools, stronger guidance on teenage relationship abuse, and early intervention to challenge harmful attitudes among boys and young men.

Essex Police's Chief Constable Ben Julian Harrington said:

Tackling violence against women and girls takes all of us - society, policing, and local partnerships.

Project Vigilant demonstrates exactly that. Tackling VAWG cannot be done by policing alone and requires support from our communities, our businesses – from taxi firms and takeaways to pubs and clubs – our Community Safety Partnerships and local councils.

Project Vigilant is just one example of how, in Essex, we are all coming together to keep women and girls safe but also to prevent offences of VAWG before they happen by targeting those that our intelligence or patrols tell us mean to do harm.

It is not for women and girls to change their behaviour – they should be free to enjoy an evening out without fear of being targeted by a predator. Instead, it is those who are intent on causing harm who need to change their behaviour and realise that we are watching and waiting for them, there is no place for them on the streets of Essex.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/undercover-cops-boosted-across-9-more-forces>